**Thirty-six**

  I went out into the front garden with Mina. We sat on the front wall waiting for Dad’s car turning into the street. The door was open behind us, letting a wedge of light out into the dark. Whisper came, slinking through the shadows below the wall. He sat below us, curled against our feet.

  ‘What does it mean,’ I said, ‘If Skellig eats living things and makes pellets like the owls?’

  She shrugged.

  ‘We can’t know,’ she said.

  ‘What is he?’ I said.

  ‘We can’t know. Sometimes we just have to accept there are things we can’t know. Why is your sister ill? Why did my Father die?’ She held my hand. ‘Sometimes we think we should be able to know everything. But we can’t. We have to allow ourselves to see what there is to see, and we have to imagine.’

  We talked about the fledglings in the nest above us. We tried together to hear their breathing. We wondered what blackbird babies dreamed about.

  ‘Sometimes they’ll be very scared,’ said Mina. ‘They’ll dream about cats climbing towards them. They’ll dream about dangerous crows with ugly beaks. They’ll dream about vicious children plundering the nest. They’ll dream of death all around them. But there’ll be happy dreams as well. Dreams of life. They’ll dream of flying like their parents do. They’ll dream of finding their own tree one day, building their own nest, having their own chicks.’

  I held my hand to my heart. What would I feel when they opened the baby’s fragile chest, when they cut into her tiny heart? Mina’s fingers were cold and dry and small. I felt the tiny pulse of blood in them. I felt how my own hand trembled very quickly, very gently.

  ‘We’re still like chicks,’ she said. ‘Happy half the time, half the time dead scared.’

  I closed my eyes and tried to discover where the happy half was hiding. I felt the tears trickling through my tightly closed eyelids. I felt Whisper’s claws tugging at my jeans. I wanted to be all alone in an attic like Skellig, with just the owls and the moonlight and an oblivious heart.

  ‘You’re so brave,’ said Mina.

  And then Dad’s car came, with its blaring engine and its glaring lights, and the fear just increased and increased and increased.

**Thirty-seven**

  An endless night. In and out of dreams. In and out of sleep. Dad snoring and snuffling in the room next door. No moon in the sky. Endless darkness. The clock at my bedside was surely stuck. All it showed were the dead hours. One o’clock. Two o’clock. Three o’clock. Endless minutes between them. No hooting of owls, no calling from Skellig or Mina. Like the whole world was stuck, all of time was stuck. Then I must have slept properly at last, and I woke to daylight with stinging eyes and sunken heart.

  And then we fought, my Dad and I, while we crunched burnt toast and swigged tepid tea.

  ‘No!’ I yelled. ‘I won’t go to school! Why should I? Not today!’

  ‘You’ll do as you’re bloody told! You’ll do what’s best for your mum and the baby!’

  ‘You just want me out of the way so you don’t have to think about me and don’t have to worry about me and you can just think about the bloody baby!’

  ‘Don’t say bloody!’

  ‘It is bloody! It’s bloody bloody bloody! And it isn’t fair!’

  Dad kicked the leg of the table and the milk bottle toppled over on the table and a jar of jam crashed to the floor.

  ‘See?’ he yelled. ‘See the state you get me in?’

  He raised his fists like he wanted to smash something: anything, the table, me.

  ‘Go to bloody school!’ he yelled. ‘Get out my bloody sight!’

  Then he just reached across and grabbed me to him.

  ‘I love you,’ he whispered. ‘I love you.’

  And we cried and cried.

  ‘You could come with me,’ he said. ‘But there’d be nothing you could do. We just have to wait and pray and believe that everything will be all right.’

  Moments later, Mina came knocking at the door.

  She had Whisper in her arms.

  ‘You’ve got to come and help me,’ she said.

  Dad nodded.

  ‘I’ll come for you this afternoon,’ he said. ‘When the operation’s over. Go with Mina.’

  She took me to her garden. She gripped Whisper tight. On the rooftop, the blackbird started yelling its alarm call.

  ‘Bad boy,’ she said to the cat, and she went to the open front door, threw him in, pushed it shut behind him.

  ‘The fledglings are out,’ she said. ‘Stay dead still and quiet. Watch out for cats.’

  We sat on the front step and didn’t move.

  ‘Under the hedge,’ she said. ‘And under the rose tree by the wall.’

  I started to ask what I was looking for, but then I saw the first of them, little brown feathered ball with its beak gaping in the darkness beneath the hedge.

  ‘This is how they start their life outside the nest,’ she said. ‘They can’t fly. Their parents still have to feed them. But they’re nearly all alone. All they can do is walk and hide in the shadows and wait for their food.’

  The parents came closer, the brown mother to the lowest branch of the tree, the jet black father to the top of the hedge. Worms dangled from their beaks. They called softly to each other and the fledglings with little clicks and coughs. ‘First day out,’ whispered Mina. ‘Think Whisper’s had at least one of them already.’

  The parents waited, wary of us, then at last they dropped into the garden. A fledgling tottered out from beneath the rose bush, let its mother drop the worms into its beak, tottered back again. The father fed the one beneath the hedge. The parents flew away again.

  ‘They’ll be doing this all day,’ said Mina. ‘Flying and feeding all the way till dusk. And the same thing tomorrow and tomorrow till the chicks can fly.’

  We stayed watching.

  ‘Cats’ll get them,’ she said. ‘Or crows, or stupid dogs.’

  Dad came out of our house. He came into Mina’s garden. Mina pressed a finger to her lips and widened her eyes in warning. He tiptoed to us.

  ‘The fledglings are out of the nest,’ she whispered.

  She showed him where to look.

  ‘Yes,’ he whispered. ‘Yes. Yes.’

He crouched beside us, dead still.

  ‘Aren’t they lovely

?’ he said.

  He cupped my cheek in his hand and we looked deep into each other’s eyes. Then he had to go.

  ‘You just keep believing,’ he said. ‘And everything will be fine.’

  He went to the car and drove from the street as quietly as he could. Mina and I watched and waited as the brown mother and the jet-black father flew in and out of the garden, feeding their young.

**Thirty-eight**

  Mid morning. Mina’s mother brought cups of tea for us. She sat beside us on the step. She talked about the fledglings, the flowers that were bursting into bloom, the air that every day became warmer, the sun that every day was a little higher and a little warmer. She talked about the way spring made the world burst into life after months of apparent death. She told us about the goddess called Persephone, who was forced to spend half a year in the darkness deep underground. Winter happened when she was trapped inside the earth. The days shrank, they became cold and short and dark. Living things hid themselves away. Spring came when she was released and made her slow way up to the world again. The world became brighter and bolder in order to welcome her back. It began to be filled with warmth and light. The animals dared to wake, they dared to have their young. Plants dared to send out buds and shoots. Life dared to come back.

  ‘An old myth,’ I said.

  ‘Yes,’ she said. ‘But maybe it’s a myth that’s nearly true. Look around you, Michael. Fledglings and blooms and bright sunshine. Maybe what we see around us is the whole world welcoming Persephone home.’

  She rested her hand on my arm.

  ‘They can do marvellous things, Michael. Maybe you’ll soon be welcoming your own Persephone home.’

  We thought of Persephone for a while in silence. I imagined her struggling her way towards us. She squeezed through black tunnels. She took wrong turnings, banged her head against the rocks. Sometimes she gave up in despair and she just lay weeping in the pitch darkness. But she struggled on. She waded through icy underground streams. She fought through bedrock and clay and iron ore and coal, through fossils of ancient creatures, the skeletons of dinosaurs, the buried remains of ancient cities. She burrowed past the tangled roots of great trees. She was torn and bleeding but she kept telling herself to move onward and upward. She told herself that soon she’d see the light of the sun again and feel the warmth of the world again.

  Then Mina’s mother broke into my thoughts.

  ‘I’ll watch the birds,’ she said. ‘Why don’t you both go and wander for a while?’

  And Mina took my hand, and led me away.

  It was like walking in a dream. The houses tilted and swayed. The sun glared over the rooftops. Birds were ragged and black against the astonishing sky. The roadway glistened, a deep black pond. Invisible traffic roared and squealed.

  She held my arm.

  ‘Are you all right, Michael?’ she kept asking. ‘Are you sure you’re all right?’

  We made our way towards the DANGER door. She led me through the gate, through the long garden, through the door, into the dark and dusty interior. We went up in silence. She held my arm, like I was an old man, or an invalid.

  On the final landing she told me,

  ‘He’ll be waiting for us, Michael. He’ll be so pleased to see you again.’

  She turned the handle, we went in, sunlight poured through the arched window.

  We stood there staring.

  He wasn’t there.

  Mina ran back down through the house. I heard her feet on the bare boards, doors swinging open. I heard her calling for him.

  ‘Skellig! Skellig! Skellig!’

  I heard her coming slowly back up to me. Her face was paler than ever. There were tears shining in her eyes.

  ‘He isn’t here,’ she whispered. ‘He just isn’t here at all.’ We went to the window and gazed into the empty sky above the city.

  I found myself falling forward. I gripped the windowsill tight. I touched my heart.

  ‘Oh, Mina!’ I said.

  ‘What is it?’

  ‘My heart’s stopped. Feel my heart. There’s nothing there.’

  She caught her breath. She touched my chest. She called my name.

  And then there was just blackness.

**Thirty-nine**

  ‘Don’t call Doctor Death,’ I murmured. ‘Don’t call Doctor Death.’

  I was slumped on the floorboards. Mina was kneeling over me. She stroked my brow, whispered my name.

  ‘Not Doctor Death,’ I said again.

  ‘No,’ she said. ‘Not Doctor Death.’

  I struggled to sit up. I leaned against the wall beneath the window.

  ‘Touch your heart,’ she said.

  I did this, and I felt the beating there.

  ‘See?’ she said.

  ‘But it’s only mine. It’s not the baby’s.’

  ‘Oh, Michael.’

  I felt my strength coming back to me. I swallowed, squeezed my eyes, tightened my fists. I felt my heart again.

  ‘It’s only my heart, Mina. Not the baby’s. The baby’s dead.’

  ‘You can’t know for certain,’ she said.

  I pulled myself to my feet.

  ‘I think I can, Mina.’

  She held me as we went out of the room and into the darkness of the house.

  ‘Where is he?’ I asked as we went down.

  No answer.

  ‘You looked everywhere? I said.

  ‘Yes, everywhere.’

  I touched my heart again and it was still the same.

  ‘She’s dead,’ I whispered.

  ‘But maybe she’s fine.’

  ‘I’ll phone the hospital,’ I said, but I knew I wouldn’t dare.

  We went out into the spring light. As we stepped out, we saw blackbird fledglings tottering into the cover of hedges. In the lane, an unknown cat hunched behind a dustbin, and watched us pass with hostile eyes.

  ‘Your dad’ll come for you soon,’ said Mina. ‘He’ll tell you everything’s fine.’

  ‘Don’t tell him about me,’ I said. ‘He doesn’t need to worry about me.’

  She smiled and squeezed me tight.

  ‘Where the hell’s Skellig?’ I said.

  She shook her head and we walked on. Miles above us, a great heavy bird flapped across the blue.

  ‘William Blake used to faint sometimes,’ said Mina. ‘He said the soul was able to leap out of the body for a while, and then leap back again. He said it could be caused by great fear or enormous pain. Sometimes it was because of too much joy. It was possible to be overwhelmed by the presence of so much beauty in the world.’

  We walked on. My body was heavy and awkward, like I was arthritic, like I was turning to stone.

  ‘I think you understand that,’ she said.

  I couldn’t speak. My mouth was dry and sour, like I’d swallowed the owls’ leavings from the windowsill.

  ‘Yes,’ she said. ‘That’s what he said. The soul leaps out and then leaps back again.’ She laughed. ‘It’s like a dance.’

  We went back to Mina’s house. We sat on the step and watched the fledglings.

  ‘Maybe he’s gone away for ever, like he said he would,’ I said.

  I held my hand against my heart, and we waited for Dad to come home.

  **Forty**

  Mina’s mother rested a wooden board on her knees. She smiled and put a pomegranate on the board.

  ‘Pomegranate,’ she said. ‘Isn’t it a lovely word?’

  She cut through the fruit with a kitchen knife. The red juice leaked out. The hundreds of seeds inside were exposed.

  ‘It’s what Persephone ate while she was waiting in the Underworld,’ she said.

  She gave a quarter to me, a quarter to Mina, and took a quarter for herself. She gave us pins to pick the pips out with, and we sat there nibbling away the sweet flesh from the bitter seed.

  ‘Look at all the life in this,’ she said. ‘Every pip could become a tree, and every tree could bear another hundred fruits and every fruit could bear

another hundred trees. And so on to infinity.’

  I picked the pips from my tongue with my fingers.

  Just imagine,’ she said. ‘If every seed grew, there’d be no room in the world for anything but pomegranate trees.’

  I licked my lips. Mina sat close against me. We watched the blackbirds returning time and again to feed their young. I watched the sky and imagined Skellig flying away, a tiny black speck travelling over the endless curves of the world. The phone rang and my heart thudded and raced as Mina’s mother went inside, but it wasn’t Dad.

  I picked seed after seed from the fruit.

  ‘How’s your heart?’ whispered Mina.

  I tried to find the baby’s gentle beat beneath my fast and frightened thud.

  I shook my head.

  ‘She isn’t there.’

  The sun climbed through the sky, became warmer, warmer.

  Soon Mrs Dando cycled into the street and saw us sitting there. She bustled into the garden while the blackbirds squawked their warning calls from the rooftop and the fledglings scuttled into cover.

  ‘Such a lovely day,’ she said.

  She beamed at us.

  ‘We’re all missing you again,’ she said.

  Mina’s mother gave her the final quarter of the pomegranate and she nibbled the seeds and giggled.

  ‘Pomegranates,’ she said. ‘Not had one of these since I was a girl of twelve.’

  She told me about Leakey and Coot and all the others.

  ‘They keep telling me — “Get Michael to come back.” ’

  She gave me a new folder of work. There was a drawing of the opened body with arrows pointing to its parts. Rasputin’s note told me to write the missing names.

  Mina and I looked at the drawing together.

  ‘Tibia,’ we said. ‘Fibula, sternum, clavicle, radius, ulna, kidneys, liver, lungs, heart, brain.’

  ‘And spirit jumping in and jumping out but never seen,’ said Mina.

  Mrs Dando looked at her. I knew that Coot would have talked to Mrs Dando about her. A daft monkey girl, he’d have said. The lass that sits in a tree like a crow. The lass that’s keeping him away.

Miss Clarts had written, ‘Write another story like the last one, Michael. Something just as lovely. Let your imagination fly.’

  I closed my eyes. I wanted to imagine nothing. The baby was dead. Skellig was gone. The world that was left was ugly, cold, terrifying. The blackbirds squawked and squawked while Mrs Dando told Mina’s mother about what a great footballer I was, about how I loved having a daft time with the other boys.

  Mina’s mother smiled.

  ‘How’s the baby?’ Mrs Dando said at last.

  ‘Don’t know,’ I whispered.

  ‘She’s having an operation today,’ said Mina.

  ‘Oh, poor little soul,’ said Mrs Dando.

  ‘Yes,’ said Mina. ‘And to be quite honest, Mrs Dando, the last thing Michael needs is to be troubled by petty things like football and school.’

  Her mother sighed.

‘Mina,’ she said.

  ‘Well,’ said Mina. ‘Isn’t it true? Michael?’

  I couldn’t stand it. I went to sit on the front wall, facing away from them.

  ‘See?’ said Mina. ‘See how you’ve upset him?’

  And then Dad drove into the street and parked the car in front of me. He held the door open. I got in beside him. He put his arm around me.

  ‘It’s over, son,’ he said.